A Rule of Life

Frank L. Vernon, D.D.

THE LIBRARY
THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
CATHEDRAL HE[illegible]
NEW YORK 25, N. Y.

A ROODCROFT PAPER

Holy Cross Press West Park, N. Y.

8TH THOUSAND

INTRODUCTION

ONCE a year, at least, it is well to examine one's rule of life. Before Advent we ought to test our rule by the experiences of the past year. If revision is necessary, we should attend to it.

We are all creatures of habit. Consciously or unconsciously, we all have a rule. The main points of a rule are concerned with the practice of prayer and the use of the sacraments. If one has a definite rule, the thing to do is to look back over the year to see whether or not the rule has been fulfilled. If it has been, then there may be a question as to whether the rule may be expanded. Perhaps an extra private devotion might be added. Perhaps the number of Communions might be increased.

If there have been irregularities in observance, it is possible that a revision is necessary. Perhaps the rule was too exacting. It is better to keep a simple rule than to neglect a rigorous one. Experience will teach us our capabilities and our limitations.

An examination of conscience concerning our rule will enable us to know if we have been lax. If the trouble is with us and not with the rule, then

we must try harder and persevere under our infirmities. It is all such a personal affair, that I would not for worlds intrude. But I think that you might find a rule card useful. So I have prepared one. If you care to take one home, you might fill it out and keep it to refer to. Of course, it would be for your eye alone. You must decide for yourself how much of it you will observe. Then you can write in, on the blank space, what you like. For example, after Communion, write the stated times for receiving. If you want to have special week days for Mass or an Office or Intercessions or Visits to the Sacrament, write that in. And so on. Do you see what I mean?

My one desire for you is, that wherever you are you may have the feeling that you are protected and sustained and cheered by your religion, particularly from Monday morning until Saturday night. The week day religion is what counts. The Sundays are not so difficult. I thought the cards might help. I hope they will.

A Rule Suitable to One's State of Life

One of our duties towards our neighbors is "to do *my* duty in that state of life unto which it shall

please God to call *me*." So in making a rule of life, we are bound to make a rule which will be suitable to our state in life. The object of the rule is to help us to do our duty. The Catechism teaches us that God calls us to a state in life. A person who has failed to attain to that state is said to have missed his or her vocation. In that case the vocation will have been missed or lost for lack of a well-kept rule. The rule is the safeguard of vocation. It is the safeguard of any vocation, whatever it may be. If a person has a vocation to the ecclesiastical state, that is, to be a priest; or to the religious life, that is, to be a monk or a nun, the rule must be suitable to the state of life. But the point I make here is, that God gives vocations to live in the world. The secular vocation is a true vocation. Now a person who has a secular vocation is not expected to live under a rule suitable to the ecclesiastical vocation, or the religious vocation. But what we all have to do, is to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called. We do that by making God the Centre of our world, whatever it is. The rule makes God the Centre and keeps us at the Centre. The rule makes it possible to be in the world, but not of it. And that means escaping many things, including being

bored to death. A rule will give you just enough detachment to make you free. And just enough freedom to make you keen. And if you are free and keen, you will be happy. So, you see, you really do need a rule. And this does not mean that you must be someone else. You only need to be yourself in your own world.

PRAYER

PRIVATE morning and night prayers are given first mention in our rule of life, because our daily private devotions afford us an indication of our spiritual condition. They are reliable tests of spiritual vitality. If we are normal, our morning and night prayers will be regular. If they are irregular, there is something wrong somewhere.

I am writing today concerning the spirit of private devotion. Before we consider that, however, it will be well to provide ourselves with whatever has been proved useful for the mechanics of prayer. I feel sure that a book of private devotion is necessary. And for this reason: we all need a scheme of prayer. We need a model form which will illustrate the scope and content of private prayer. We need a book of private prayer for the same reason that we need a book of Common Prayer. There are many books of private prayer. I have never seen a book better than "The Treasury of Devotion." I recommend it to you. In time, undoubtedly, you will color your own prayer life. You will pray more and more in your own words. But you will retain the

outline, and the structure will be the lasting legacy of your book.

You will need a visible sign to serve you as a reminder of your duty to pray. I advise you to have a crucifix hanging on the wall of your sleeping room. Bring your crucifix to the Church to be blessed. Then pray your way through life at the foot of the Cross.

The spirit of private daily prayer is this. In the morning you renew your life vow to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto your life's end. This is the reason the Christian signs himself with the sign of the Cross. Then all through the day, wherever you are, whatever you are doing, your single intention is to be loyal to God. Loyalty is the watchword by day.

At night you commend those for whose well-being you are responsible to God. You pray for forgiveness for your failures. You return thanks for your mercies. You pray for a blessing. Then in simple faith you take your rest. Trust is the watchword by night.

You will pray as you breathe. And you will be at peace.

BIBLE READING

ONE OF THE points in our suggested rule of life is Bible reading. The collect for the second Sunday in Advent provides us with the intentions for Bible reading. They are *learning, patience, comfort, hope.*

We are to learn to know God and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent. The Holy Ghost will lead us into all truth. Speaking through the Church, the infallible interpreter of Holy Scripture.

We are to learn to glory in tribulation, knowing that tribulation worketh patience.

We are to learn to find our comfort in friendship with God.

We are to learn, from our experience in God's friendship, to hope all things.

The Bible is our best collection of lives of the Saints. Everything came true for the Saints and they lived happily ever after. The Bible is the Book of Happy Endings. As to making a rule about reading the Bible, we ought to read it *daily.*

We may safely resolve to read "a few verses daily." This would mean *two or more verses.* We can always do that, no matter how rushed a day

may be. This is the safest wording for the rule.

We may have enough time and freedom to give five or ten or fifteen minutes. If we are sure of this, we may assign the given time. But I still think it is better to make the minimum the rule. We may do more if and when we desire.

Before reading, we will do well to say the Our Father and the collect for the second Sunday in Advent.

MEDITATION

MEDITATION is the fourth point in our rule. It sounds difficult. I know it can be made so. But I don't think it really is. It all depends upon how one goes about it. If you stick to a book or imitate a person or assign too long a time, the chances are the average person living in the world will decide not to try. But my point today is that persons living in the world cannot get through a day without meditating about *something*. For after all to meditate is just to stop and think. We would be frightfully dull if we didn't do that. It may only be the coffee or the headline of the paper, at breakfast, or the plans for the day,

or the mail, or a book, or a play. But it is something. And it isn't the time it takes, but it is the thought that matters.

The idea of daily meditation is to make sure of at least one thought about God to carry through the day. The thought will not always be in the front of one's mind. But it will be at the back where thoughts lodge and affect speech and acts far more than we realize. That is simple enough, isn't it?

But *when* can time be found? Well, if you really haven't a spare moment all day long, you can manage it while you are dressing, or on your way to your first appointment, or in a motor, or on a bus, or in a street car, or anywhere when you do not have to think about what you have to do for someone else. There is always a free time, even if it isn't a long time.

But *what* will you meditate about? Oh, one of the verses you read in the Bible reading, or the last Sunday's Gospel or Epistle or Collect, or one of the sacraments, or something you heard in a sermon, or the season of the Church year, or something you read in a spiritual book. You have enough material. Only (this is important) you ought to plan it

out, on Sunday, say, for a week ahead, a point a day.

But *how* will you do it? (1) Say an Our Father and a Come Holy Ghost Our Souls Inspire. (2) *Recollect* your point. (3) *Reflect* how it ought to affect you. (4) *Resolve* to act accordingly. (5) Say "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

You may accomplish it in three minutes anywhere or thirty minutes in church. In either case it will be a meditation.

CONFESSION

I AM NOT at the moment concerned with the doctrine of confession. There is no escaping it, if one is logical. The principle involved in absolving is one and the same with the principle involved in baptizing or confirming. Spiritual gifts are conferred through visible signs by a human ministry. The argument against the sacrament of Penance sweeps with it the sacrament of Baptism and the sacrament of Confirmation and the whole sacramental system.

Nor am I concerned with cautionary admonitions against its free use or with warnings concerning its alleged abuse. Those who go to confession are satisfied with its use. The alleged abuses are invariably the obsessions of those who have no experimental knowledge in the matter.

I am writing today of one particular aspect of confession. It is the protective benefit that I have in mind.

The sorrows of the soul cannot long be suppressed with safety. Morbidity lies that way. Nor can they be prudently confided to any and every person who seems sympathetic. Self-pity is the poison of that practice.

Yet there are griefs that cry for human counsel, and there are wounds that only God can heal.

There are crises that require secret speech under sealed silence and divine power through human agencies. The confessional precisely supplies this very need.

The prescribed examination of conscience reasonably insures the necessary manifestation of the symptoms to be observed for correct diagnosis.

The form required for confession insures brevity, simplicity, and directness.

The seal of the sacrament of Penance safeguards inviolably the confidences of the penitent.

The counsel given removes anxiety by the weight of the authority which accompanies it.

The efficacy of the absolution imparted is attested by the Saviour of the world who declared that they who are so loosed on earth are loosed in Heaven.

The penance given provides wholesome relief for what remains of suppressed emotion.

The amendment required stimulates and redirects the will into normal expression.

There has never yet been discovered a satisfactory substitute for the confessional. Without hesitation or exception I advise its habitual use.

HOLY COMMUNION

THE PROMISE of the Christmas Gospel is that Our Lord will give us power to become the sons of God. He makes us His children in baptism. He gives us the power of children of God in Communion. The power is renewed with every Communion. It is developed by filial devotion.

When we kneel with outstretched hands at the

altar, we offer and receive a gift. Our gift to God is our selves, our souls and bodies, our understanding, memory, will, and affections. God's gift to us is Himself. His sacred humanity unites our own with Him. The fire of His love consumes the evil that is in us and releases the good which He has made possible for us. That good is rightly called virtue or power. It is the power of the sons of God. It is the energy released by the action of Divine fire upon human nature. It is stronger than any force opposed to God. It prevails over every enemy of the sons of God. The gifts are exchanged in silence and the power is generated in secret. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him." In the ordinary events of the common life the process goes on. The surface flaws will be apparent. We shall see them in each other constantly. Charity will not require us to be blind to the imperfections that we see in each other. But charity will open our eyes to the results of Our Lord's workmanship. The shadows will only bring out the lights. What we are will be forgiven for the sake of what we are becoming. As we live on together, days and years will pass very swiftly. Impressions

will deepen and memories will mellow and faith in God and each other will grow steadfast. And all the while the life that is hid with Christ in God will mould us into the family and bind us with the household of God.

Some day will be the eve of Eternity. Sacraments will cease. Mysteries will be unveiled. The secrets of all hearts will be revealed. We shall all awake after His likeness and be satisfied. We shall know even as we are known.

This is our real, innermost, intimate life, isn't it? It is because we really have it, that we take sweet counsel together and walk in the House of God as friends.

ATTENDANCE AT SUNDAY MASS

IN THESE brief commentaries on the rule I am emphasizing the reasonableness rather than the disciplinary aspect. There is a sweet reasonableness in our religion. There is a winsomeness about it that attracts the heart and captivates the will. There is an easiness of the yoke and a lightness of the burden. Devotion discovers the way to make discipline a joy. It is always so with anything

we really care for. The reason why we care for anything is that it has something to do with someone we love. We do not have to be told to do it. We just do it. This is why we go to Mass on Sunday. I think everyone would go to Mass, if only they understood what it is all about.

I myself know less than nothing about music. It is because I am too stupid to understand what it is all about. But I try. I always read what a learned acquaintance of mine writes in the newspaper about the symphonies and the operas. Sometimes I wish I did understand the symphony. And sometimes I wish I didn't understand the opera.

But I do wish that everyone understood the Mass. Because it is the one really thrilling thing in all the world and sea and sky. It is the one undimmed truth and the one unfading splendor on earth and in Heaven. It is the one symphony that is celestial. It is the one drama that is divine. It is the one great, gleaming, golden arch that spans from earth to Heaven. The Pontiff who built this Bridge is God. And over it walk men and angels.

The truth that the Mass contains is simply astounding. The act which expresses that truth is astoundingly simple. It is astounding because it

announces that God came to earth and was Incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and dwelt among us, and suffered and died for our sins, and rose from the dead to restore to us everlasting life, and ascended into Heaven to prepare a place for us. But the supremely astounding climax in the Mass is the moment when the God Who did all this appears in person, sacramentally veiled, and exposes Himself to our sight for our adoration.

The Mass is astoundingly simple. So simple that it shows forth in one act things which if they should be written every one, even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. So simple that old men and children, young men and maidens, virgins and matrons, the learned and the unlearned, may hear each in their own language of their own hearts, the wonderful works of God, and see with their own eyes the mighty thing which has come to pass.

When all the world is mixed and muddled and distracted, and wilful and wanton and soiled, and mad and sad and wistful, the Mass is the massive miracle of truth and light and joy and hope and comfort and peace and sanity and stability, the one thing on earth that shall not pass away.

WEEK-DAY MASS

THE POINT that I emphasize is this. Our Lord has taught us that the safeguard against anxiety is to commit our cares to God; that the secure protection against despondency is to live one day at a time; that the sure sufficiency of sustenance is to be found in daily bread. This is precisely what daily Mass makes possible.

I suppose that most of us know what it means to urge an unsoothed mind to troubled sleep, while all the while the heart is heavy. We are not apt to forget the vague depression of first awakening. For an instant the sensation is undefined. And then remembrance stabs us. There is another day to live through. How to do it, God only knows. But there is the point. God does know. And God is at Mass. So we go to Mass. If God begins the day, then God will end the day. Whatever happens we are sure of that.

When the day is gone, it is really gone. And somehow or other we are ready for another. And in the same way, God meets us at Mass. He, to whom a thousand years are but as yesterday, and that which is past as a watch in the night, is the

Advocate who pleads our cause and the Governor who orders our way. The Sursum Corda banishes despondency as the sun dispels the mist.

Each day will bring its strain. But it is only the strain of one day. One day's strength is sufficient. That strength is given in the Bread which comes down from Heaven daily. For the Bread is God. And our sufficiency is of God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness.

Now I do not mean to say that all of life is as desperate as this, though it is in spots. But what I do mean to say is, that Mass has depths of compassion as impressive as its heights of glory. To those who know the depths, it is given to know the heights.

SUNDAY MATINS AND EVENSONG

THE Sunday Offices, Matins and Evensong, are of obligation for the clergy. They are not of obligation for the laity. The clergy are required to recite the Office daily. The laity are not.

Yet in the practice of religion we cannot be content with only doing what we are required to do. We do want to make free-will offerings. The recitation of the Office is a devotion which brings a rich reward. The psalms, lessons, canticles and collects afford the substance of praise, meditation and prayer. Whether the Office is read in church, or at home, on train or shipboard, out of doors, in the country or by the sea, it gathers one into a peaceful enclosure, in which one senses the solidarity of the household of God.

The Office ought always to be said with special intention. The first intention is the praise of the Divine Majesty. The second intention is the Mystery commemorated by the day or season. The third intention is the special intercession, in which we pray for a particular object. The Office is like a censer. Our devotion is like the kindled charcoal. The intentions are like the grains of incense. The fragrant smoke is the symbol of our prayer.

When we offer the Office with special intention for persons, we envelope them with the atmosphere of holiness, in which the evil that may be assailing them is frustrated and in which the holy desires and good counsels are infused and made fruitful. The persons may be near at hand or far away. They may be aware that the Office is being said for them, or they may be utterly unconscious

of the offering. But the effect is irresistible. The Office never fails to accomplish its work of prayer. Next to offering one's Mass or one's Communion, there is no more loving service that one can render to one's friends than to offer the Office for them. The Office, like everything else, is most happy when it is most selfless.

It is easier to say the Office if one has a Prayer Book and a Bible bound together. The book can be obtained in convenient size, at any church book store.

Of course, it goes without saying, that the Office cannot be a substitute for Mass. Going to Church means going to Mass. That is the Sunday duty.

But you will find that saying your Office on Sunday will supply a real need in your spiritual life. And there is something about Evensong on Sunday that seems to round out the day. The modern conditions of living force distractions upon us. At the end of Sunday, one feels the need of being sterilized and toned up. Evensong satisfies the aspiration expressed in the words of the hymn, "With Thee began, with Thee shall end the day." A well-observed Sunday gives a peace that the world can neither give nor take away.

WEEK-DAY OFFICES

THE DAILY Offices are recited by the priests publicly in the Church. If pastoral duties prevent a priest from being present in choir, he reads his Office when and where he can. But the Office must be completed before midnight.

The regular recitation of the Office in choir ensures a sustained prayer life daily throughout the year. There is never a day when the devout Christian does not have the privilege of reciting the Psalter, hearing the reading of the Holy Scriptures and participating in the Common Prayer.

I have in mind two benefits secured. The first is this. The changeless witness to the unchanging Faith. Out in the world there is so much uncertainty and confusion and infidelity. One finds it everywhere, in the public prints, in books, on lecture platforms, in pulpits, in conversation. The irreducible minimum of belief seems to be the goal of popular teachers.

In the midst of all this, the Divine Office with its rhythmic regularity and its cycle of teaching and devotion, unfalteringly and sweetly witnesses to the Faith once delivered to the Saints. Nothing

changes. Everything endures. The light is undimmed. And by that light the Christian is guided into the way of peace. In the place that he loves, he hears, in the language that he understands, the Truth that makes him free.

The second benefit is this. The securely enclosed refuge. We, all of us, need a sanctuary, to which we may fly for protection and consolation. Most of the time, a person living in the world is imprisoned in places for which he has little liking. Even the pleasures pall, when once he has become sophisticated. Then, at some such time, if only he becomes aware of the refuge of the Divine Office, he discovers what he needs. Perhaps he wanders into Evensong, some afternoon on his way up town. He sees the priests in the choir. He sees the high altar in the afternoon half light. He sees the white lamp flickering before the Sacrament altar. He hears the Office and the words are sweet and healing. Before he leaves the Church, he kneels for a few moments before the Sacrament. And when he goes out from the Church, Locust Street and Rittenhouse Square have for him a little bit of the light of Heaven that he hadn't noticed before. Many a day after, when his affairs are troublous, he will console himself

with the old words into which he has learned to read a new meaning:

"Be the day weary or never so long,
At length it ringeth to Evensong."

The Divine Office praises God and it greatly comforts man.

INTERCESSION

THE NEXT point in our rule requires us to devote a certain portion of time to intercession. Intercession means praying for others. Petition means praying for one's self. It would be interesting to examine our prayers, just to see what proportion intercession bears to petition. The best cure for self-centredness is to increase the intercessions and to reduce the petitions. The almost immediate effect is to take one out of one's self. The next result is the cultivation of sympathy. Sympathy means feeling *with* people, not merely feeling *for* them. We can never really understand a person, until we have learned to sense his feelings. It usu-

ally takes a long time, but it can be done. This is really what the Communion of Saints means. It is the life received from Our Lord, which every member shares with every other member, finding articulate expression in mutual intercession. If the life is strongly possessed and keenly sensed, intercession becomes spontaneous. The energy of intercession is the pulsation of the Body of Christ, Who ever liveth to make intercession for us.

Now, death has no more dominion over that Body. In Him we are all made alive. We are alive when we are in the flesh. We are alive when we are out of the flesh. In the flesh or out, it makes no difference. So we go on interceding. We intercede for each other regardless of time, space, sight, sound, or physical contact. We intercede for persons in Philadelphia, London, Calcutta, Purgatory, wherever they may be. The Saints in Heaven are so perfect and are so perfectly one with Our Lord, that they know with Him and feel with Him perfectly. This is how they know when we ask them to pray for us. This is why they know how we are feeling when we invoke them. It is not possible to imagine a Christian on earth, in Purga-

tory, or in Heaven, who is beyond either invocation or intercession. Let me quote for you a verse sent me by one who has gone farther in intercession than most:

"I cannot tell why there should come to me
A thought of someone miles and miles away,
In swift insistence on the memory,
Unless there be a need that I should pray.

Perhaps just then, my friend has fiercer fight,
A more appalling weakness, a decay of courage,
Darkness, some lost sense of right,
And so, in case he needs my prayer, I pray.

Friend, do the same for me!
If I intrude, unasked upon you, on some
crowded day,
Give me a moment's prayer, as interlude.
Be very sure I need it, therefore pray."

VISITS TO THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

THE LAST point mentioned in our rule is "Visits to the Blessed Sacrament."

The Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the Tabernacle. Visiting the Blessed Sacrament means praying before the Tabernacle. To pray before the Tabernacle is to pray in the Sacramental Presence of Our Lord. The Blessed Sacrament is Our Lord.

It is not easy to describe the experiences of Visits to the Sacrament. They are so very personal and intimate and confidential. And the results are so wonderful.

Picture the church as it is when there is no service going on. It is dim and quiet. Before one of the altars a white lamp burns.

Somewhere out in the world, someone is conscious of a care or pierced with a sorrow or assailed with a temptation or surrounded with a peril. Someone is conscious of fightings without or fears within.

The recollection of the lamp is like the sailor's memory of a harbor light. To sight the light is to make the anchorage. Through the storm or the fog one must steer the course. The red harbor light

means danger. The white sanctuary light means safety.

So the Christian bears his burden and bides his time until he makes his visit to his home harbor.

He enters the church, makes his genuflection, and kneels before the Sacrament. At first he has no word to say. He looks at his Lord and His Lord looks at him. The consciousness of the compassion of the Sacred Heart soothes his sorrows and drives away his fear. And presently he is pouring out his grief. Sometimes his own, sometimes another's. Sometimes he seeks consolation. Sometimes he seeks strength. Sometimes he seeks guidance. Sometimes he seeks protection. Sometimes he asks an undeserved favor. And always he has something for which he would return thanks. But whatever it is, he leaves his cause at the threshold of the Tabernacle. When he rises from his knees he finds that he goes in peace.

All day long this is happening. Many come on a like errand. By night the Tabernacle is festooned with the prayers of the pilgrims of the day.

The next morning, when the priest offers the Holy Sacrifice, everything is presented to the Fa-

ther. Nothing is overlooked. Nothing is forgotten. For God notes all these things in His Book.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY GHOST IN SOULS

WE HAVE finished the little commentary on our parochial rule of life. Our timetable gives us opportunities for regular observance. The spirit of observance is the gift of the Holy Ghost. To Him we must go for holy desires and good counsels.

It is very wonderful to see the work of the Holy Ghost in souls. We can't see it all. But we can see some of it. The first motions drawing a soul are quite wonderful. The Holy Ghost is gracious. His motions are gentle, and He is endlessly patient. He begins where the soul is able to begin. He never imposes a burden too heavy. He never forces the pace. And He speaks to each soul in its own tongue the wonderful works of God. A sense of mysterious beauty at a High Mass may be the first motion for one. I know of a notable conversion that began that way.

A sense of indefinable awe on the occasion of a chance visit to a church, on a week day, and the flicker of the white lamp at the end of a dim aisle, and the motionless figures of a few people praying in the still quiet, may be the occasion of an awakening. A sentence in a sermon, a line in a hymn may cling in the memory. "The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof and canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit."

And then, suddenly at the appointed time the full awakening. The truth is revealed. The doors are opened. The soul has found its way Home. Everything is easy after that. Penitence breaks down every barrier. Faith changes darkness to light. The water of Baptism, the fire of Confirmation, the blood of Penance, and then the Holy Communion and the first amazed cry, "It is the Lord!" The adventures of prayer, the strange fiery temptations, the tests of discipleship and the surprises of vocations will follow. What the soul shall be will not yet appear, but some day it will awaken after His likeness and be satisfied.

In a church where mighty works like these are to be done, there must be unfettered faith, un-

maimed sacraments, and unhindered devotion. And priests and people must evince, in some degree, the fruits of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. For by our fruits we shall be known.